

HINTS FOR BUNCOMBE.

A SERMON
BY NORWOOD DAMON,

JULY 4, 1858.

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HINTS FOR BUNCOMBE.

A

S E R M O N

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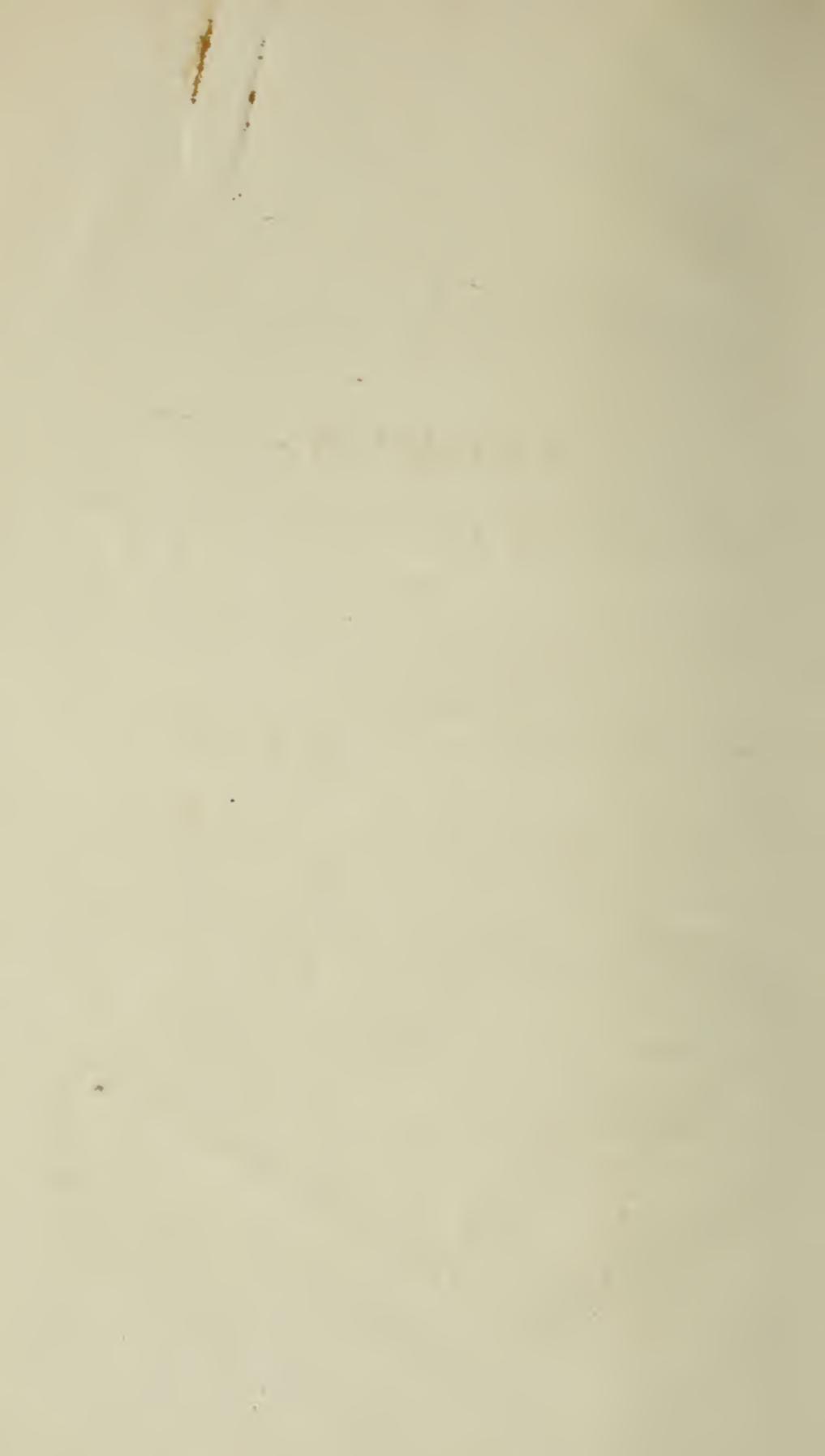
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S E R M O N .

1ST CORINTHIANS, 8, 9.

"TAKE HEED LEST BY ANY MEANS THIS LIBERTY OF YOURS BECOME A STUMBLING BLOCK."

To day is the Anniversary of our National Independence. As this year it occurs on Sunday, it may not be inappropriate to recognize it in our accustomed ministrations. It is the 82nd Fourth of July since the one succeeding that memorable 19th of April, when Samuel Adams, wrapt in prophetic visions of the independence and future greatness of the American Colonies exclaimed, "what an ever glorious morning is this." It was an ever glorious morning, and it is still a glorious day, yet it is not *all* sunshine, as the hours advance towards the noontide, dark, frowning clouds appear, they portend the possibility at least of the whirlwind, tornado and storm.

Autograph

The views of our revolutionary fathers in regard to liberty were correct. It is desirable, *very* pleasant, to be free, as free as air, and it is a sufficient eulogium upon the theory of our government to say, that it designs for each individual all the liberty and rights compatible with the equal liberty and rights of others. *Absolute* liberty is an impossibility, at least in organized society. It must have its limits and restrictions fixed and regulated by law. For example, we cannot have liberty to dictate our neighbor, make him manage his affairs according to our will and not his own, take his property, or destroy his life. All this and more, a powerful savage with weapon in hand might do, but *we* must submit to *authority* on every side, even in the most minute and trivial affairs of every day life.

The law tells us what and how we may buy and sell, it weighs our weights, measures our measures, balances our balances, and takes decided measures to balance accounts with us if they are found wanting; it tells us where we may light our matches and smoke our cigars, what we shall and shall not eat and drink, and both male and female, how and wherewithal we shall be clothed; it commands the landlord to cut off his accommodating tap that made himself and the public smile, and empowers the *state* to keep, mix and drink its own potations. The law inspects our wine-pipes, smoke-pipes, steam-pipes, gas-pipes, water-pipes, and sometimes compresses our windpipes; tells what vessels shall be used at sea, and what on shore; regulates our imports, exports, transports, seaports, port-wine and the port-holes

of our ships; our currency, politics, morals and religion. If we live in a city, it even tells us when we husk our green corn, what must be done with the refuse, and when we shell our peas where we must put the pods.

In fine, there is scarcely an interest of civilized life, or great or small, domestic, social, public or private, concerning which the law has not an act entitled an act, supplementary to an act, entitled an act in addition to an act, entitled an act to regulate, restrict, abolish, prohibit, encourage, amend, promote, extend or improve it in some respect or other, and men everywhere, all and singular, are commanded to know by these presents, that they are under control, and to regulate themselves accordingly; and also, that all other acts, and sections of acts, or parts of sections of acts, inconsistent with this act are hereby repealed, and therefore said acts and parts of acts are no longer in force; or as Sheridan has it, "First, comes in a bill, imposing a tax; and then comes in a bill to amend the bill that imposed the tax; and then comes in a bill to explain the bill that amended the bill that imposed the tax; next a bill to remedy the defects of the bill that explained the bill that amended the bill that imposed the tax, and so on *ad infinitum*," after the style of "The House that Jack Built."

Like the ten virgins of the parable some of these laws are wise and some are very foolish, though it may be questioned whether the proportions are exactly half-and-half; but by submission to them, imperfect though

they be, we pay cheaply for the protection and advantages of civilized and organized society.

We could not then have a much better government, or liberty, in this imperfect state of being, than we now possess,—that is we white folks of course I mean,—for in this peculiarly enlightened, christian and consistent age and land, if a man is so absurd as to be born black, what can he rationally expect? he must take the responsibility of his own construction of the paper that declares that “all men are born free and equal;” he will probably live to learn that all is not gold that glitters, that there is a pickwickian sense to that document,—that we meant it slightly for buncombe.

In some respects our glorious spread-eagle republic too much resembles the republics that have already expiated their sins by death and oblivion; we use a great many resonant words, but frequently they are “*vox et præterea nihil*,” or as we render it in English “glittering generalities.”

Compared with the other nations of the so called civilized world, we are blessed with a very tolerable freedom, but unfortunately it often happens that men are incapable of appreciating or preserving their choicest blessings. The greatest good *abused* may become the greatest evil; it was Absalom’s beautiful hair, whose rank luxuriance he unduly fostered and gloried in, that held him up a target for Joab’s darts. To the very ignorant and unprincipled liberty is only a stumbling-block, that makes confusion, anarchy, and strife.

Every nation if it would prosper, or even long exist,

must have strength somewhere, either in its government or in the wisdom and virtue of its people. France, lacking the latter, gave up her republic and inaugurated a despotism. Mexico has neither, and what is she? a confused, bloody mob, sinking rapidly back to barbarism; a disconsolate Jonah waiting to be swallowed up by the great and "ever glorious" whale of these United States; and when we swallow her, I fear she will prove so much too much, for our powers of digestion and assimilation, that we shall gladly spew her up again. With eight million souls she could not resist Gen. Scott, who with less than twenty thousand men, took her very capital; so imbecile and degraded is a republic without intelligence or virtue.

And how is it with *our* republic, freedom's forlorn hope, and the grand Mogul of all the republics,—how is it in regard to intelligence and virtue?

In regard to *intelligence*, I had arranged for this occasion a full and important series of statistics from court and county records and other reliable sources, as collated by that champion of education, the Hon. Horace Mann. These statistics, though gathered a few years ago, are more favorable to us than those of a still later date; such has been the influx of the tide of ignorant foreign emigration and other counteracting influences to the efforts of the friends of education.

By these statistics it appears that in several states nearly a fourth part, and in some counties a third part of the adult population can neither read or write. In those states and counties, a quarter or third part of the

young men applying for marriage licenses, instead of recording their names, can only make their mark. "It would be preposterous" says Mr. Mann, "to suppose that their intended wives had gazed at the splendors of science from any nearer point of view."

Much as I regret it, a reasonable brevity compels me to omit these statistics, though they deserve to be read and pondered well by every American statesman and citizen who *can* read. I will however quote one passage of comments upon them from Mr. Mann, and with that dismiss the topic of the *intelligence* of our republic.

"There has not been for years past," says Mr. Mann, "and there cannot be for years to come, an election of a President from any party, or a Congress, or with perhaps the exception of the New England States a Governor, chosen under written constitutions, and to act and legislate under written constitutions, whose choice will not be dependent upon, and determined by, legal voters who are unable to read or write, voters who do not know and cannot know whether they are voting for king log or king stork.

"The illustrious band who framed the Constitution of the Union, Washington, Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison,—who adjusted all the principles which it contains, by the line and the plummet, and weighed the words which describe them in scales so nice as to tremble beneath the dust of the balance—these noble men, expended the energies of their mighty minds to perfect an instrument, which before half a century should pass

away was doomed to be administered, controlled, and expounded by men unable to read or write.

“The power of Congress over all the great social and economical interests of this vast country, the orbits in which the states are to move around the central body of the system, the functions of the executive, who holds in his hands the army and the navy, manages all diplomatic relations with foreign powers, and can involve the country at any time in all the horrors of war, and that grand poisoning power, the supreme judiciary, appointed to be the presiding intelligence over all the system, to harmonize its motions, and to hold its attracting and divergent tendencies in equilibrium,—all this splendid structure, the vastest and wisest ever devised by mortal man, is already at the mercy, and at any time may come under the control, of men who are incapable of reading one word of the language which describes its framework and defines its objects and its guards; incapable of reading one word of cotemporaneous exposition, antecedent history, or subsequent development, and therefore are ready to make it include or exclude *anything*, as their blind passions may dictate; such are the men who hold the balance of power in these United States. Phæton was less a fool when he mounted the chariot and attempted to drive the horses of the sun, than ourselves, if we expect to reach the zenith of prosperity and happiness under influences such as these.”

Thus much substantially from Mr. Mann, and thus much for the intelligence of our proud and boastful re-

public in this latter half of the enlightened nineteenth century.

And now comes the question of her virtue. The *general* virtue of our country is easy, decidedly too easy. Let it be borne in mind that I am speaking of our country, not of any particular locality ; with local difficulties that concern neither the general public nor myself I have nothing to do, especially when unacquainted with the merits of the questions at issue ; in such matters I prefer to adhere closely to the know-nothing party. Our country, her sayings, doings, and principles, it is these that I call in question this day.

We have many good men and true in all parties, and in every department of public and private life, men who would not for their right hand compromise a principle, who love, and are willing faithfully, devotedly to serve their country and their God, who would be as true to a neighbor, or a stranger even, as to their own child, all the ends they aim at are patriotic, disinterested, good. Wealth, office, fame, cause no purturbations in their principles or actions. And we have many noble, independent journals, some even among the strictly party press.

It needs however but a glance at the party papers, a slight acquaintance with our legislative bodies, our great men, so called, our political morals, our gloomy, dyspeptic, acrid, hollow, uncharitable, sectarian, fossil theology, which the late great revival has failed to wholly vitalize and christianize, to show that the general public virtue is easy. Money, lust, place, power, influence, fame,

self-will, manifest-destiny, and the extension of the area of a light complexioned style of liberty—these are our Gods, to which we daily offer the morning and evening sacrifice, for these we hazard *all*, our religion, our country, its union, its real freedom, its dearest interests and institutions, and the hopes of our posterity,—and frequently we bring *all* to the very verge of ruin.

What to us is the blood of martyred heroes, our father's blood, their tears that watered the tender tree of liberty, what are *all* the holy remembrances of the revolution, what is any sacred thing, that it should draw us from our allegiance to our Gods?

Money is the richest power, and can buy up all the rest, therefore money is the supernal deity. John Randolph, graphically termed the “eloquent screech owl,” spoke of certain of our public men as being animated by seven principles, namely, five loaves and two fishes.

Look at the political party newspaper—overflowing with patriotism, zealous beyond conception for certain principles and measures vital to the country's being, earnest for the people's good, entirely self-sacrificing and disinterested, with willing contributors, ready and eager at a moment's warning to crawl on hands and knees from the north pole until their hair is combed by the surging of the remotest antarctic ice, with only a brief pause midway, say at Mount Popocatapel, just to rest a moment and enjoy the tonic influences of the *crater*,—and all this for the dear, very dear, *dear* people.

But how happens it that this model sheet, this encyclopedia of the philanthropies, can never see a good

thing in the *opposite party*, especially during a presidential campaign? Why, in any instance, though with all his might he tries to avoid it,—why, by the merest accident, cannot its opponent *blunder* into the truth once in a great while? Why is it invariably all right on one side and as invariably all wrong on the other? Why is one party infallible and the other not? Why is one allowed to use a conscience, be it ever so elastic, to act from conviction and principle, with the privilege of thinking for itself, while the members of the other are condemned as guilty hypocrites for exercising the self same liberty—for thinking and acting independently for themselves.

Charity would suggest that there may be some truth, honesty, and wisdom, and that probably there is more or less of error on all sides. Why then should there be such bitterness between individuals, parties and political papers, as for instance so fearfully characterized the last presidential campaign? frequently making bitter enemies of next door neighbors, and affording a reasonable, moderate man no chance whatever for peace or comfort,—in fact, in most places there was little safety for a man unless he was stark mad on one side or the other.

What is the solution of all this? The answer is clear,—filthy lucre, the itching palm, John Randolph's seven principles, these are the roots of the mischief. The paper must tickle the party, that the party may tickle the paper. It is a mutual aid and admiration affair; and the paper and party must denounce all dissenting papers and parties, individually, collectively and

indiscriminately, without regard to truth or justice ; and why ? simply because the five loaves and two small fishes are at stake.

We have a popular morality that teaches that some sins are not sins, while other sins are exceedingly sinful ; there is still a prevalent feeling that “*all* is fair in politics,” especially when defeat stares us in the face and in *lingo politico gramatico*, “our sufferings is intolerable.” A lie in these things is truth to the party, if a judicious one, well told, well stuck to, and that brings in votes like doves to their windows, just as an exchange of hats is no robbery, if we get a better one, and to steal an umbrella in a drenching storm is the highest form of honesty ; even lying for a religious party is frequently justified by saying that it is to help a good cause, by the dogma that the end sanctifies the means ; and that by other parties besides the scarlet lady who made a seven legged stool of ancient Rome.

And so as a nation we go on, tampering with our excellent institutions, periodically lashing the multitude into a perfect frenzy and fury of excited and angry feeling, fomenting and prolonging party discords, both in politics and religion, dragging everything however irrelevant or sacred into our controversies, sparing no man’s feelings, personal interests, or good name, but making *all* bitter as aloes, wormwood and gall.

The general aim seems to be, not to elicit truth, and really promote the interests of our country, but rather individual self-aggrandizement and the aggrandizement

of our party, that through it *we* may be personally promoted and built up—even perhaps until we reach the presidential chair, an honor it would seem more to be coveted than the highest seat in heaven. Hence, we accomplish comparatively nothing, succeed in none of our grand reforms, settle no principles, establish no permanent national policy; but only succeed in keeping the whole nation in a perpetual foment. To-day one fever rages, to be rapidly supplanted by another to-morrow; it is panic politics, panic business, panic money-pressure, panic religion by panic revived, panic morality, panic reforms, and panic everything, to the end of the chapter.

Agitation! it is our trade, our life; by it and in it we talk and walk and have our daily being; out of it we could no more breathe than the fish in upper air. We never *mean* to settle anything. Kansas is not our only perpetual nightmare and perennial tribulation; it is neither the alpha nor omega of our alphabet of woes. From and before the Hartford Convention, in spirits or in fossil, we have preserved them all, to use as our political infirmities require. From time to time, like regular periodicals, we bring them out and give them air; the last edition ever fresh and new; we have always some available homebred fireside horror, some gory monster in gorgon terrors clad, some flaming serpent from his fiery mane shaking down pestilence, incendiary tracts, and free discussions of our peculiar institutions, or some lovely female opening for our comfort a Pandora's box of woman's rights. We are never at fault for favorite

discords and pet bones of contention, and plenty of them; and it has not been the fault of any *party* if they have not all proved immortal.

We feel that it would not *do* to settle things honorably, righteously, reasonably and seasonably, because if we did, Othello's occupation would be gone. We play upon a harp of thousand strings, and manage to keep some of them in vibration, if not in tune, without cessation; so we march to music, and many are compelled to face the music all the time.

We elect a President and Congress with fiery enthusiasm, and no end of torch-light processions, banners and transparencies,—as if the whole thing were not transparent enough from the beginning,—at an expense of time, money, and animal magnetism, that beggars us all, in purse and soul, for at least a year to come, simply to do work for the next President and Congress to undo and repeal;—and when we have no presidential election at hand, no fierce sectarian religious excitement or embroil, no filibustering expedition to Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, or the rest of mankind, and have thrown off Mons. Belly as altogether too much abdomen for our debilitated Central American digestive apparatus, when we have no immediate hope of foreign or domestic war, no fresh gouts from bleeding Kansas' wounded side, and the dissolution of the Union is positively postponed until another session of Congress; when we have no choice morsel of tittle-tattle, no noted public character to lay out and dissect with the knife and scalpel of scandal, no ministerial delinquency, no adultery, divorce case, or

incompatibility of disposition, no gallant Blount Zouave De Rievire, De Dean Mac Mary Ann La Boker, or Dorcasina Sheldon, no flogging, shooting, stabbing affair, or startling murder to absorb our effervescence ; or when these popular devilments become so common that they are no longer luxuries, and we cease to enjoy our murders with our accustomed zest, and minor crimes are a drug in the market,—then, just for a change, a tit-bit and a relisher, we institute a Vigilance Committee in New Orleans or San Francisco, or indulge in the luxury of a free Plug-Ugly riot in New York, Philadelphia, or the capital of our nation.

So we culminate. Five loaves and two fishes for our constitutional and climatic avarice, a rough and tumble fight, and a gratuitous defiance of all law and order, as a tribute to our largest Bunker Hill, Yorktown and Saratoga liberty. Such is an over-true, though not a sunny-side view, of the universal Yankee nation, each of whom, in person or by proxy, has fought, bled and died for liberty, and of which, with all their follies, I rejoice to say that I am one.

No wonder that good and considerate men here have their doubts and fears, as well as their high hopes, and look forward with some troubled forebodings to our country's future, as the wise father is filled with painful anxieties for the fate of his favorite but wayward son ; and no wonder that the Napoleons, the Czars, the King Bombas, and other audacious tyrants of Europe, look on our extravaganzas with a satisfaction so transparent that it is hardly disguised, and with eager expectation

are awaiting the hour when the grand explosion and closing tableaux shall appear.

If our professed patriots and christians of all parties labored with a hearty good will, not for sect, but to raise up and relieve the down-trodden, the sorrowing, the ignorant, and the poor ; if they tried in real earnest to promote the prosperity and best good of our country, if they loved her as Washington, or as La Fayette the stranger did, or as Wallace and Bruce loved Scotland ; if all our strong-minded, out-spoken, lady politicians and warriors loved these United States, and were willing to dare and suffer for them as Joan of Arc did for her beloved France—were they like the patriot heroine who melted into bullets the ware that held her daily bread and sent her young and favorite son to war, anticipating the sentiment of Miss Bremer in her heart, “To die on the battle field, fighting for one’s dear country, O that would be sweet !”—were our patriot population composed of men and women such as these, there is not a star in glory but would pale before the brightness of this Republic.

But it is sadly true of the great majority of our so-called patriots and christians, that they seem to have not one particle of sympathy or aid, one glow of patriotism or philanthropic feeling, for any poor lost souls who happen to be out of the pale of their own particular little communion.

Under the seven-principled creed, on one side, our national shield displays the great and true men of all

parties *couchant*, on the reverse the little fishes the rogues and demagogues *rampant*. Under existing circumstances, parties cannot *afford* a strictly righteous man his full and proper influence; he is not reliable when dirty but necessary party work is to be done; his tender mercies are not sufficiently cruel. “Our party, right or wrong, and however bounded,” is not his impulsive watchword, and of course he is not the man for the times, no matter how great or noble he is, he is not available, he has no *gutta percha* in his conscience, *he* cannot be president, no! he must die without the sight.

Proudly as our fathers founded this republic, famously as we have thus far reared it up, exalted as it has become among the nations, there is some real danger that it may by-and-by be broken into insignificant fragments —danger that like the ancient republics, like Greece and Rome, as we become more and more prosperous, we may become so licentious, unprincipled, ignorant, and careless, as to be unworthy our liberties and institutions, and incapable of maintaining them. When liberty runs into licentiousness, anarchy follows, and it becomes a stumbling-block over which a people fall into despotism.

But there is a brighter side to this picture, though it has taken so long to examine these dark groups, that I have no time to present it now. Our case is by no means desperate. No nation can be stronger, happier, or more glorious than we yet may be, if in future we will be faithful to ourselves. All our varying interests may be made to harmonize, our social, religious, political and individual sins be repented of, removed, and

forgiven, if we will but bring intelligence, principle, good will, charity, a spirit of conciliation and accommodation, and true patriotism, into our public and private councils, and as a people cultivate lives of practical virtue.

But if in God's might we are to be our own salvation and the conservators of the world's freedom, we must be alive and awake ; " eternal vigilance is the price of liberty !" we must cherish generous-religious, brotherly-christian principles, and general intelligence. *All our children must be educated*, both in the ways of science and of virtue. We must support the institutions of learning and religion, and support them well ; republics without these things have been tried, and miserably failed.

And speaking of education, pardon me a momentary episode. It is a beautiful arrangement of providence, that frequently when a man is what *we* count dead, he yet more than ever lives and speaks to bless the world. Your late fellow citizen, Dr. Zadock Howe, I am told, was a valued and influential townsman, a wise counsellor, true friend, an original and ingenious thinker, — a good physician, who brought balm to many a wounded frame and spirit, through a long and successful practice in Billerica. But what matchless sanative that he or any physician ever gave, could unfold young minds and hearts, and do the miracle that his school is working every day ? If he was a blessing while on earth, he is much more a blessing now, and in coming days he shall be a greater blessing still.

His best monument is not in the church-yard, nor in yonder beautiful enclosure with its fresh bright walls that his munificence has reared. Anon, when those young souls are men and women, and the world has found in the riches of their intellects and virtues how much it owes him,—then shall men rise up and call him blessed, and build him a monument of gratitude in their hearts, whose cap-stone shall reach to heaven ; and it may be seen not only that in his death he accomplished more than in all his life, but that his discriminating benevolence has brought forth more and better fruits than all the other institutions of Billerica besides.

The present occasion is both rare and prolific. The Fourth of July does not come on every Sunday, and in an Independence sermon it is pardonable, if ever, to wander from the beaten weekly track, the hackneyed technics of the pulpit, and preach something that shall draw people out and keep them awake, even in the afternoon. But like the eccentric Mr. Harvest's pudding, even such a sermon is after all a sublunary thing, and of course must have an end. If there are other kindred thoughts worth treasuring, with Paul they must go their way for this time, and until the year rolls round again, then if there is a convenient season, we will call for them.

We have all heard glorification orations enough ; it may be well occasionally at least to offer a little of that rare element, unmitigated truth, some of our country's solemn realities, even though it be done in sportive and satiric vein, the better to fasten them in the memory.

But to conclude. Shall we take *excelsior* for our motto, and make the freedom of this nation the glorious liberty of the children of God? or shall we make it a stumbling-block, and fall over it, and finally this republic, the last hope of humanity, fail! and there be shut down over us forever an unpitying iron despotism, that shall make our homes, hearts and lives as barren of all enthusiasm, enterprise, hope or blessing, as are the priest-ridden and tyrant-ridden masses of the European and Asiatic worlds.

